

# **Social Media's New Role in Emergency Management**

## **Emergency Management and Robotics for Hazardous Environments**

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# **SOCIAL MEDIA'S NEW ROLE IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

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*As technology continues to evolve, emergency management organizations must adapt to new ways of responding to the media and public. This paper briefly examines social media's new role in emergency management. This includes definitions of social media, the benefits of utilizing social media, examples of social media being used and finally a discussion of how agencies, such as Department of Energy national laboratories can begin including social media in their emergency management plans.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The way people communicate and receive information has gone through a radical transformation in the last few years with the invention of social media. In the February 2007 edition of the Web Content Report, Shel Holtz defines social media as “cover(ing) the broad range of channels through which Web users are generating their own content in a collaborative community-driven environment.”<sup>1</sup> Citizen-journalism made popular through blogs, wikis, vlogs and podcasting are all examples of social media. According to Kevin Allen, a contributor to the Web Content Report, “when bad things happen to good companies, addressing criticism online can be the difference between a grease fire and four-alarm blaze.”<sup>2</sup> Talking about social media and bloggers Stephen Baker and Heather Green of Business Week magazine say that corporations “cannot afford to close their eyes to them, because they’re simply the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the Internet itself.”<sup>3</sup> Today, using social media as a communication tool is not part of most organizations emergency plans, but paying attention to this “explosive outbreak”<sup>4</sup> is becoming more and more critical to an organization’s ability to survive. As the way people gather and create information begins to change, federal crisis communicators must take the initiative to reexamine the way they disseminate information, speak with constituents and react to public feedback, or face becoming a public symbol of national discontent.

## **II. TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

A blog is a Web site where entries are written in chronological order and displayed in reverse chronological order, much like a message board or chat room. E-mail and instant messaging allow for dialogue to exist between two individuals; blogging allows for commentary, thoughts and ideas to be posted online and commented on by millions of users instantly. Similarly, video blogging, also known as vlogging, allows individuals and companies to quickly post video content online. The trend of vlogging is helping corporations distribute public service announcements, press conferences and status alerts to mass audiences during special activities or emergency events. Podcast means Portable OnDemand broadCAST. This audio-based technology allows individuals to create their own radio shows and deliver them automatically over the Web. One way Podcasting can be used is to distribute public safety messages. Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, is a way to simultaneously track multiple blogs, breaking news and other online media content.

## **III. BENEFITS OF UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA**

Applying social media tactics to corporate and government crisis communication has several advantages. First, it brings credibility to your organization at a time when it is likely to be most needed. This occurs because the use of social media – including but not limited to blogging and podcasting – is inherently conversational and transparent allowing near real-time information to be disseminated to concerned citizens, employees and the media. And at the same time, it prompts discussion, debate and feedback from the very people who most care about the crisis and who are more likely to shape the lasting perception of the incident once the immediacy dies down.

Social media also guarantees your message will be heard. Because there are no press deadlines, no misinformed reporters, and no need for the use of your Information Technology department, you can disseminate the information how you want and as quickly as you

want. The San Diego Union-Tribune used blogs during the October 2007 California wildfires to update residents on shelters and precautions they could take. Because the newspaper used blogs, the information was shared instantaneously with users who could read and respond to the information from their Wi-Fi enabled laptops, Bluetooth smart phones and other mobile, networked devices.

Another benefit of social media is that it provides a unique and efficient way for crisis communicators to defend an organization's brand and reputation. For example, if a blog is speaking negatively about an organization or spreading false information, crisis communicators can respond by posting counter remarks or linking to other blogs and online content that sets the record straight. In this manner, crisis situations can be minimized or averted simply by participating and monitoring the blogosphere. In a fall 2005 story published by Business Platinium Ventures, the author contends "since blogs are interactive, consider posting a response on the same site where the negative comments appeared."<sup>5</sup> You can also use your own company blog as a way to correct information and have your side of the story heard.

Finally, many private companies are using public blogs and social media sites like YouTube to deliver critical messages from the CEO at the height of a crisis situation. By doing so, these companies are meeting the demand from stakeholders for timely, accurate information, while also helping to balance the coverage.

### **III.A Case Study: Broward County, Florida**

The easiest way to demonstrate the benefits of using social media during an emergency situation is to provide a real example of its use during an emergency event.

On the morning of November 7, 2007, Broward County Sheriff's Department Deputy Paul Rein was transporting convicted felon Michael Mazza from a state penitentiary to the county courthouse for a criminal hearing. At some point during the ride, Mazza escaped his handcuffs, broke through the back seat divider, and fatally shot the officer with the officer's own firearm before escaping in the police vehicle. Suddenly, the peaceful community of Pompano Bay was on high alert as an armed and dangerous felon was on the run.

Within minutes of the incident, witnesses reported the disturbance to 911, and surrounding police departments quickly emerged on the scene to set up a perimeter and begin an investigation. Area schools were notified of the incident and many moved to lock down their campuses. Meanwhile, both the local and national media began to report the breaking story. But what occurred next shows the true value of using social media applications at the height of a crisis situation. From the moment the first witness called 911, the blogosphere

began being populated with pertinent information. Before the network media could even turn on their cameras, information about the suspect's description, escape vehicle, and license plate information was being posted to the blogosphere courtesy of eye-witnesses at the scene. In particular, one personal blog found at [www.pamibe.com](http://www.pamibe.com) posted this comment:

#### **BSO Officer Down**

Detention Deputy Paul Rein was shot in Pompano Beach [1401 N. Powerline Road]. He is in critical condition and has been transported to North Broward Medical Center. The transport van has been found at Flanigan's parking lot 27th AVE & Davie Blvd. The suspect is reported getting into a white sedan with plate number W84QZY.<sup>6</sup>

Other blogs including [www.imascumbag.com](http://www.imascumbag.com) began creating and circulating informal wanted posters complete with the suspect's photo and full rap sheet which could be downloaded in PDF form. As the story progressed throughout the morning, many blogs were updated with the officer's medical condition and eventually the news of the suspect's capture near a local pawn shop. When it was learned that the officer had been fatally wounded, other blogs and Web sites began creating living memorials and recirculating official statements from the sheriff's office and Florida Gov. Charlie Crist.

Though it is unclear whether the information posted to blogs aided in capturing the suspect, judging by the number of comments posted to the blogs during the event, a significantly large population of residents was exposed and informed of the story in near real-time fashion. The officer's photo and stories of his dedication to the police force continue to be prominently displayed and featured on Web sites such as the Officer Down Memorial Page, which includes a profile of Deputy Rein and the ability for the public to leave reflections and comments. Other sites provided links to original content developed by bloggers.

Unfortunately, the Broward County region has seen more than its fair share of police shootings. Rein was the third officer shot, and the second police officer killed since August 2007. This fact appears to have influenced residents to use other forms of social media, including sites like Flickr and YouTube to communicate and share the news with anyone who cares to listen.

A simple search for Broward County Sheriff's Office on Flickr yields more than 100 photos posted from a police department funeral procession for another slain officer, Deputy Brian Tephford. And on YouTube, a member has created and posted an informational video for the still unsolved murder of Broward County Sergeant Chris Reyka. The video includes photos of the suspect's vehicle, information about a monetary reward, and

contact information for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Though the information above highlights an example of how blogs and social media sites can engage and influence a wider audience during a crisis, this is not to say that there isn't room for improvement.

During the Rein incident, the majority of blog content was being developed by independent bloggers who were either at the scene of the crime, or who had quick access to information about the case. During the five hours between the shooting and the suspect's capture, 19 schools were placed on lockdown and area residents were instructed to stay in their homes. Meanwhile, many established websites including the official government site for Broward County, and sites for several area school districts had limited or no information posted online and no official blog to communicate information to concerned parents or residents.

Similarly, the Broward County Sheriff's Department – which has created a blog – didn't post any information about the case, the suspect's description, or memorial information about its fallen comrade. In fact, the sheriff's blog – which doesn't allow for reader comments – appears to be used mainly as an alternative to traditional push, or one-way communication. This is a direct contradiction to the intent of blogs and other social media sites which were designed for two-way, open dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders.

### **III.B. Examples of Organizations use of Social Media**

While the Broward County example shows private individuals utilizing social media, there are corporations and organizations that are using social media to communicate during times of emergency as well.

For example, according to author Jonathan Bernstein, the poultry industry turned to blogs when ABC-TV ran its 2006 made-for-TV movie *Bird Flu in America*. According to Bernstein, "the industry hired a consultant to monitor industry-related bloggers and find out their probable reactions to the film."<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, ABC's movie flopped so it did not attract much attention, but the poultry industry was ready to turn to the blogosphere to clear any rumors as a result of the film. Similarly, the Department of Health and Human Services launched a temporary blog during the same time to quell the public's reaction to a potentially damaging story about the government's emergency response plan to a pandemic outbreak, and to provide the public with steps to take in preparation for such an event.

Another organization that is beginning to use social media is the Red Cross. After Hurricane Katrina the Red Cross knew it had to figure out a better way to communicate with community members. It began work on creating a disaster newsroom. According to Ragan reporter Michael Sebastian, "The Red Cross currently

operates one primary blog site called the Online Disaster News Portal. Because the 24-hour media cycle is constantly demanding information, especially during a disaster, these blogs will compile information for the media."<sup>8</sup> The Online Disaster News Portal received its first big test during the 2007 California wildfires. The blog included pictures from the emergency site, press releases and first-person accounts of events. Beyond just providing important information to the public and media, the Red Cross has gained the ability to correct information that the media may have gotten wrong and increase fundraising and awareness efforts. The Red Cross has trained volunteers and employees on blogging and encourages them to post information during a crisis.

These are just two examples of how organizations are now using social media to communicate with the public.

### **IV. TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR ORGANIZATION**

Since the idea of using social media as a crisis communication tool is a relatively new concept, it's understandable for a federal agency to be a bit hesitant to pursue this rapidly evolving medium.

On one hand, there's consistency, uniformity and a bit of perceived safety in sticking with traditional public affairs methods. On the other hand, social media represents a progressive, undefined and somewhat out-of-control environment. But as recent events have shown, organizations that initiate and participate in social media to start a transparent, one-on-one dialogue with their stakeholders are more often empowered, rather than impeded by it. Today, social media technology allows organizations to communicate their information (good or bad) directly with their constituents, and in near real-time, receive feedback from the people who care the most about the issue.

In the *Corporate Blogging Book*<sup>9</sup>, author Debbie Weil lays out a comprehensive strategy that nearly all agencies can adopt and apply as a way to open up new lanes of communication and transparency with their constituents. Rather than reinventing the process, the authors have borrowed from her expertise to develop five realistic methods for integrating social media technology into federal emergency operations centers.

Federal crisis communicators should begin by developing guidelines for using social media during an emergency event. Issues such as intent, training, legal implications, and desired resources should be addressed and resolved before moving forward. This may be difficult in some federal environments due to the lack of understanding about the known impacts and potential advantages of social media. However, it is an important first step to ensuring that your organization will have the support and buy-in from management in the years to come. Those wishing to integrate social media into their

emergency communications plan should begin slowly, learning and educating themselves and their colleagues on the technology and benefits of use. A great option to begin experimenting with social media is to establish an internal blog for your joint information center. Content from staff meetings, drills or training updates could be posted, viewed and commented on by volunteers or staff members.

Next, federal crisis communicators would be wise to establish a blog monitoring position in their joint information centers. Since new content is the key driver behind the social media phenomenon, it's a virtual certainty that your emergency event is being captured by a blogger, recorded on a cell-phone camera or posted to a wiki for the entire world to see. An agency that is cognizant of the blog or be blogged about reality is better prepared to engage its critics and modify its message based on public comments and reactions to the breaking news. At Idaho National Laboratory, the joint information center's media monitoring position has been revamped to include blog monitoring.

Third, all federal emergency operations centers should strive to create an incident blog as another way to quickly communicate important and relevant information, including status alerts, shelter information or evacuation routes to the media and public. If an established blog doesn't already exist on the agency Web site, a temporary one can be set up using one of several free blog platforms on the Internet. Once a blog is active, it can be linked to in subsequent press releases on the agency Web site or mentioned to reporters and the public. Creating a temporary blog for a particular emergency event is an effective way to begin using social media for crisis communication. In addition to creating a public record of an agency's response to a crisis, participating in the blogosphere builds the credibility of your organization at a time when it is most needed. It also provides an outlet for an agency to post success stories from the crisis scene and creates an environment for industry experts or thought leaders to post supportive comments.

Once an emergency incident blog is established, federal crisis communicators should enhance the textual content with photos, videos or podcasts. Again, this is not an overly complex proposal, as many free social media sites like YouTube, Flickr, and Photobucket offer a quick solution for uploading visual information to the Internet. Photos or videos from the scene of the incident, can be posted to these sites and linked to in your blog. Similarly, a short video or audio message from the agency director or incident commander can be instrumental in calming the public's reaction to an emergency incident.

Finally, federal crisis communicators should establish and utilize RSS feeds to alert subscribers to new or changing information throughout an emergency incident. Since information changes rapidly during a crisis, RSS feeds provide a valuable method for pushing out

chronological content. Those who subscribe to the feed are instantly and simultaneously provided with the most recent information related to the event. The use of RSS is already widely popular in both the private and government sector. Many national laboratories use RSS feeds to alert media contacts as story ideas or press releases are posted online. Additionally, agency's like the U.S. Computer Emergency Readiness Team and the U.S. State Department use RSS to keep subscribers up to speed on rapidly changing information.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The advent of social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and gather information about stories and topics that are important to them. This change has adversely affected the way public information officers must interact with the public and media during emergencies. By complementing your emergency communication plan with social media techniques, your organization has a better chance of communication messages, informing the public and media and ultimately surviving a crisis situation.

Any doubts that social media is just a fad can be put to rest when you consider that a recent survey by PollStream<sup>10</sup> indicates that 54 percent of professional communicators plan to incorporate the use social media to reach new audiences next year.

By following several of the easy tips to adopt social media, such as developing a social media plan, you can become an active participant in the public conversation that is already taking place during your emergency. According to Association Now, "in the absence of clear communication, rumor and innuendo will fill the gap. The Internet ensures that any gaps will be filled."<sup>11</sup>

With 110.3 million blogs and over 250 million pieces of tagged media in circulation, do you know who is talking about you?

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